STORYTELLING DRAMATIZATION AS A COMMUNITY BUILDING ACTIVITY IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

by

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education is based on a developmental perspective, in which four areas of child development (social-emotional, language, cognitive and physical) are considered. In particular, healthy social-emotional development of young children is crucial for success in all areas of growth and achievement later in life. Healthy social-emotional development is promoted by building a safe, secure and respectful environment in an early childhood setting with positive and consistent relationships among adults and children. This study explored storytelling dramatizations as an opportunity to build community within the context of one early childhood classroom. The study was a qualitative, interpretive analysis of 20 videotaped storytelling dramatization sessions viewed from a community building perspective. Ethnographic methods were used to determine themes that emerged from the videotaped data. Triangulation across investigators, time and methods enhanced trustworthiness of interpretations. Results found that the storytelling dramatization activity provided opportunities to promote community building through four emerging themes: 1) participation, 2) membership and inclusion, 3) building relationships and 4) environment. Implications for practice include providing teachers with a teaching tool that builds community and aligns with current early childhood education quality standards and child development theory.

To my mom, a gifted teacher and mother, who taught me invaluable lessons, but most of all encouraged me to be me, and fostered my unique interests and talents.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood educators focus on children's growth and development from an ecological perspective including the home, school and community working together to promote enriched development of young children (Bredekamp, 2011; Siegler, Deloache, & Eisenberg, 2006). Educators and caregivers strive to assist in the development of the whole child, including cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and language development. In particular, healthy social-emotional development of young children is crucial for success in all areas of growth and achievement later in life (Asher & Coie, 1990; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2009; Gomes & Livesey, 2008; Hartup, 1983; Johnson, Ironsmith, Whitcher, Poteat, Snow, & Mumford, 1997). Despite initiatives to push academic success in literacy, math, and science, early childhood educators are not only concerned with academic success, but also raising children who will become caring, compassionate, and emotionally stable adults. One way to promote healthy social-emotional development is by creating a safe, secure, and respectful environment in an early childhood setting with positive and consistent relationships among adults and children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2009). Many early childhood professionals focus on building and shaping a positive and inclusive classroom community.

The goal is to promote participation, cooperation, respect and empathy within the group. This study's purpose was to explore storytelling dramatizations as an opportunity to build community and positive group interactions within the context of one early childhood classroom.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Community Within an Early Childhood Classroom

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) position statement identifies the components of high quality early childhood education. One of the major components that assist in healthy development in young children, particularly social emotional development, is "Creating a Caring Community of Learners". The definition provided by NAEYC is, "The role of community is to provide a physical, emotional, and cognitive environment conducive to the development and learning (of all children)" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 16). In order to create this caring community, NAEYC recommends, based on current child development research, the following:

> A) By participating and observing in the community, children learn about themselves and others and that each person in the community is valued. B) Children learn best through social interaction. Building relationships in the classroom community is crucial to development. C) Each member of the community, including the teacher, respects and is accountable to the others to behave in a way that is conducive to the learning and well being of all. D) The teacher sets up the physical environment in order to meet young children's physiological needs for activity, sensory, and stimulation with activities that provide both rest and active movement. (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 16)

Throughout this study I used NAEYC guidelines, which most early childhood professionals are familiar with, to guide the definition of community building.

Children learn the early skills of being a part of a community while in preschool through collaborative activities in the classroom. It is important to study activities that

promote community building in early childhood classrooms because a sense of community helps children to learn about the world around them, and as children learn to be a part of a community, they establish many prosocial behaviors through peer social interaction (Epstein, 2009; Siegler, Deloache, Eisenberg, 2006). The skills used in building a community include learning to negotiate and problem solve, being an active participant, resolving conflicts, paying attention to others, respecting others, and feeling a sense of responsibility to the group (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2009). Many of these skills include, not only an understanding of emotions and empathy, but also that what one does in a community through actions is as important as what one says or feels. It is essential that early childhood classrooms provide concrete and interactive opportunities for children to practice and understand appropriate group interactions (Epstein, 2009).

In this study I explored the activity of storytelling dramatization in one early childhood classroom from the perspective of community building. With this focus, it is important to review previous research and knowledge of storytelling and dramatization in early childhood classrooms for enhancing classroom community.

Storytelling and Dramatization

Vivian Paley, respected teacher and researcher in the early childhood field, began using storytelling and dramatization as part of her kindergarten classroom curriculum in order to build an inclusive and cooperative classroom community, in which children could act out their own stories and share experiences and ideas together as a group (Cooper 2009; Paley, 1990). Since she developed the idea, many early childhood

classrooms have implemented the activity, not only for the community it builds, but also because it integrates literacy, arts, physical motor skills, and social interaction skills (Cooper, 2009; Dyson, 1994; Dyson, 2008; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Paley, 1990; Rothman, 2006; Tallant, 1992).

Most research on children's stories have focused on narrative structure, content of children's narratives and research-initiated story-stems, with the unit of analysis most often being the stories (Burton, 2009; Ding, 2009; Darling, et al, 2006; Dyson, 1994; Dyson, 2008; Libby & Aries, 1989; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007; McGrath, Taylor, & Kamen, 2004; Tallant, 1992; Wang & Leichtman, 2000; Wright, Bacigalupa, Black, & Burton, 2008). Little research has included the dramatization aspect of the storytelling process. One exception is a study that described the concept of power and identity formation in a classroom of young children through the storytelling and dramatization process (Dyson, 1994). However, that study examined older children, age 6, who are at a very different developmental stage than the children in the present study. Others have described the overall benefits to children's development of the storytelling and dramatization process (Curenton, 2006; Dyson, 1994; Genishi &Dyson, 2009; Rothman, 2006), but no studies have specifically focused on community building during dramatization.

Since dramatization is often a motivation for children to tell stories, this research explored the importance of storytelling dramatization to the children themselves, as they collaborate to dramatize their own stories together as a class, where children are excited to share, participate and interact with the group as a whole. In other words, storytelling

dramatizations may be an important avenue for building a classroom community (Dyson, 1994; Paley 1990; Rothman, 2006). Paley states,

> Stories that are *not* acted out are fleeting dreams: private fantasies, disconnected and unexamined. If in the press of a busy day I am tempted to shorten the process by only reading the stories aloud and skipping the dramatizations, the children object. They say, 'But we haven't *done* the story yet!'…Furthermore, from the teacher's point of view, the events of play and story form the children's best subject, the one they are most eager to discuss and extend to other issues. (Paley, 1990, p. 25)

Dramatizing the stories they tell allows young children to experience a concrete representation of their ideas, feelings and conflict resolution theories, as well as relate to other children's stories (Curenton, 2006; Paley, 1990). These are many of the important skills needed to form a community (Epstein, 2009).

In addition to the research on children's narratives and dramatizations, research has shown that sociodramatic play in early childhood classrooms increases opportunities for peer interaction and collaboration, it fosters healthy social/emotional development such as conquering fears, taking on new perspectives, understanding emotions, and helps young children to problem solve to work through conflicts with others (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006; Curenton, 2006; Gupta, 2009; Paley, 1990; Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969; Vygotsky, 1933; Vygotsky, 1978). However, most research on the topic of play and social interaction has been done within the dramatic play center in which children come and go, and interact mainly in dyads or triads and with same-sex peers (Barbu, 2003; Hartup, 1983; Johnson, et al., 1997; Paley, 1984). Dramatizing stories as a classroom group allows children to practice social interaction skills and peer relations within a stable social group (Dyson, 2005; Paley, 1990; Paley 1988; Rothman, 2006; Tallant, 1992). Storytelling dramatization gives young children the opportunity to experience a

sense of belonging to their classroom, which in turn fosters a sense of community (Lash, 2008). In particular, the role selection process allows for observation of group dynamics and community formation since one is able to observe children choose peers to be in their story (Child Care Connection, 1999; Dyson, 2005; Rothman, 2006).

Working as a classroom group during an activity allows children to become acquainted with peers in their classroom that they do not normally interact with, since most friendships and interactions are dyadic or triadic and fairly unstable at this age (Barbu, 2003; Hartup, 1983; Johnson, et al., 1997). The dynamics of social interaction may also differ for children participating in a large group activity, as opposed to a small group activity; large group activities may require more advanced interpersonal skills (Barbu, 2003). Pretend play in the preschool classroom setting of learning centers, or free-play, involves negotiation and distribution of roles, but often includes only certain children, whereas others may be continually rejected or ignored due to a lack of appropriate interaction skills (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Hartup, 1983; Johnson, et al., 1997). Within pretend play in the classroom, girls and boys at age 4 begin to segregate their play and have trouble relating to the opposite gender's themes and ideas in play (Barbu, 2003; Hartup, 1983; Johnson, et al, 1997). Storytelling dramatization may give the children the opportunity to experiment with nontraditional gender roles and learn to relate to each other's stories (Paley, 1990). Vivian Paley suggests children tell stories that are similar to one another in order to show understanding of each other's experiences (Child Care Connection, 1999; Paley, 1990).

Early childhood education promotes inclusive classrooms, where all children are able to learn and be valued within the classroom environment (Copple & Bredekamp,

2009). Given the lack of research on storytelling dramatizations per se, it is important to observe children in the classroom to capture dynamics of the experience of these children within the storytelling dramatization activity. This study will explore children at varied levels of socioemotional development and their opportunity to positively interact with peers during storytelling dramatizations. The present study utilized an interpretive methodology that observed children in the classroom environment in order to explore the question, “how does the process of storytelling dramatization influence group social interaction and community dynamics?” with rich and detailed descriptive narrative from the natural setting.

METHOD

The present study includes 20-videotaped episodes of storytelling dramatization in one classroom at the Child and Family Development Center at the University of Utah. The dramatizations sessions were videotaped over a six-month time period from October 2007 until April 2008. Videotapes of 20 storytelling sessions were analyzed for patterns and themes that may represent community building within the context of one preschool classroom. By observing the children interacting in their natural classroom setting with the whole classroom group, one may have a better picture of group dynamics in the community. One method for learning about the development and learning of young children includes observing children in the context of their natural environments, whether it is the home, childcare settings or preschool classroom (Barbu, 2003; Corsaro & Miller, 1992; Cooper, 2009; Dyson, 1994; Engel, 2005; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Paley, 1990). Researchers have found rich results by watching children interact or play in familiar environments (Engel, 2005; Erwin & Guintini, 2000; Dyson, 1994; Dyson, 2008; Lash, 2008).

> Such close descriptions, across various settings and over time, describe what real children do and how they differ from one another; they also offer insights into what various activities mean to the children themselves...If one wants to understand young children (rather than processes housed in young children), one is likely to need full and detailed accounts of young children in action. (Engel, 2005, p.26)

Participants and Data Collection

The videotaped data were collected in the University of Utah's Child and Family Development Center (CFDC), a NAEYC accredited early childhood program. CFDC enrolls approximately 120 children each school year, and has six part-time classes with children age 2 to 5 years and one half-day kindergarten class. The philosophy of the CFDC encourages learning through play and social interaction based on constructivist learning theory, and focuses on attending to individual developmental needs of the children (Devries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002). This philosophy, along with the parent cooperative component, emphasizes building a strong community. Most families are middle class from the surrounding community.

Teachers and assistants in the classroom were trained in Vivian Paley's storytelling method, collected stories from children, and assisted children in acting them out as part of the weekly preschool curriculum. All teachers and teaching assistants in the classroom held a bachelor's degree in child development or early childhood education. The Child and Family Development Center also trains undergraduate students entering the early childhood education or child development field, and had student teachers and practicum students in the classroom.

The videotaped data were collected in one preschool classroom containing 22 children, ages 3.9 – 5.3 years old (M = 4.7 years, SD = 0.4). The classroom group was composed of 13 boys and 9 girls. Although most families are middle class, there was great diversity in developmental levels in speech and language, behavior, and social skills. There are 20 storytelling dramatization sessions that contain 4 - 5 stories per day that were recorded over the course of six months, from October 2007-April 2008.

Dramatization sessions, versus individual story dramas, provided insight into group dynamics, interactions and community formation of the young children.

Storytelling Process

The storytelling procedure was based on Vivian Paley's storytelling and story-acting process (Child Care Connection, 1999; Paley, 1990). The process used by researchers and teachers is described in greater detail in another paper (Wright et al, 2008). The process included storytelling, or reciting the child's own made-up story, as an optional activity in the classroom during learning centers. Children were not required to tell a story to the Teacher, but the majority chose to do so. The teacher wrote the story down, exactly as the child dictated, and then reread it aloud to the child. If a child needed assistance in beginning or extending the story, the teacher or researcher used opening, continuing and closing prompts such as:

"Would you like to tell me a story so we can act it out later?"

"Tell me your story and I will write it down"

"A lot of stories begin with, 'Once upon a time…' or 'Once there was a…' You can start your story however you want. Tell me what you want to say and I will write it down"

"What happened after the (character) did (action)?"

"Then what happened next?"

"Thank you for telling me a story" (Wright et al., 2008)

Storytelling Dramatization Process

Once children had written stories, the class then acted out the stories during whole group time. A child's story was read aloud to the class; the author then chose which role he/she would like to play, and then chose classmates for the other roles. Teacher M. assisted the child in selecting children for roles if the author chose not to, or if classmates were not volunteering for a role. The author or Teacher M. selected children who volunteered for the role, and attempted to choose children that had not yet had a turn that day. The author of the story may have directed the other children in acting out the story, or children acted out the story with their own actions and ideas. If children needed assistance in acting out a particular action, Teacher M. provided ideas and direction.

Data Analysis

This interpretive study utilized ethnographic methods in order to analyze group interactions of children in the context of a preschool classroom, specifically during the storytelling dramatization activity (Corbin & Strauss, 1987; Geertz, 1970; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). The aim with using interpretive methods was to provide "a valid interpretation of the everyday observed with rich description and theoretical explanations" (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 93). The ethnographic methods used included systematic observation and note-taking of video recording, revisiting written documents and video recordings, interviewing, and journal and memo writing (Berg, 2004; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1987; Galbraith, 2007; Maxwell, 1996). The unit of analysis was the group of children within one preschool classroom during the storytelling dramatization activity. Videotapes of 20 storytelling dramatization sessions were

observed with detailed note taking and identification of patterns and themes that represented community building within the context of the activity. Over 100 pages of observational notes, including analytical notes and subjective reflections, were taken and analyzed for patterns and themes. Although I observed the videotapes from the community building perspective, I, as the researcher did not predetermine themes, allowing other themes to emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Erwin & Guintini, 2000). Detailed field notes were taken during observation, field notes were reviewed for emerging patterns, and memos which interpreted patterns and based on the field notes, ensuring the interpretations were grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1987; Graue & Walsh, 1998). After each observation of videotapes, memos were written interpreting themes that emerged in order to capture the detail and richness of the children's interactions in the moment of observation. Observations of the videotaped dramatizations occurred until a point of saturation was reached, and there were no more patterns associated with community revealed. Journal writing was also done throughout the observation of the videotapes in order to deepen the analytical thought process, assist in asking necessary process and descriptive questions about the data, and finally to assist in the process of reflecting on observations and my role as researcher (Berg, 2004; Janesick, 1998; Maxwell, 1996). Both the journal writing and observational notes were analyzed for patterns over time and interpretations were written using descriptive examples to provide true representation of the data (Berg, 2004; Charmaz, 2006; Maxwell, 1996; St. Pierre & Roulston, 2006). Once patterns and themes were determined and several memos written, I utilized webbing, clustering, and developed

typologies of observations and memos to organize data for further interpretation (Berg, 2004; Charmaz, 2006).

Studying children in the context of the classroom is important in learning about social interaction of young children in order to explore, "what goes on between children, how children function in groups and how they transact and interact" (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p.xvii). Interpretations of the data were made through a social constructivist perspective with themes grounded in the data, but supported with theoretical framework from the field of child development, and then associated to the larger cultural context at this particular time (Berg, 2004; Graue & Walsh 1998). It was important to link the interpretations to the larger cultural and historical context of the early childhood education community in order to broaden the application of information learned in this study (Graue & Walsh, 1998). The broader application of observations and insights of the storytelling dramatizations also rely on the trustworthiness of the study (Berg, 2004; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

Trustworthiness

My aim, as an interpretive researcher, was for my research to be applied by teachers in the context of early childhood settings. Therefore, the trustworthiness of the methodology was crucial for not only the generalization of the study, but also the practical application of the research. Trustworthiness is a concept in qualitative research that aligns with reliability in more quantified methods of research (Berg, 2004; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Due to the fact that one individual led this research, I engaged in triangulating methods over time and people in order to avoid personal bias in the

interpretations of the data (Berg, 2004; Graue & Walsh, 1998). First, the observation notes were read by two other researchers and discussed at weekly meetings. Secondly, the videotapes were recorded over a 6-month period, which allowed me to observe changes or patterns over time. Consistent and repetitious emergence of themes over this time period provided increased trustworthiness to the interpretations. The third portion of triangulation was to interview the classroom teacher in order to confirm or disconfirm patterns, and add further detail to interpretation of storytelling dramatizations from active participation within the classroom and storytelling dramatization activity. The interview questions were open-ended in order to provide flexibility in responses from Teacher M. (Erwin & Guintini, 2000). The interview questions are located in Table 1.

Table 1: Classroom Teacher Interview Questions

1)	Why do you include storytelling in your class?
2)	What is the teacher's role in storytelling dramatizations?
3)	What strategies do children use to be included in the dramatization activity?
4)	What strategies do children use to be excluded in the dramatization activity?
5)	How does the teacher include children in the dramatization activity?
6)	How does the teacher exclude children in the dramatization activity
7)	What skills are children developing throughout the dramatization activity?
8)	Discuss Storytelling dramatization activity in terms of gender.
9)	Who participates in Storytelling? Is there anyone who did not ever participate in storytelling dramatizations?
10)	Tell me about (Name of Child).
11)	Tell me about the children over time during the storytelling activity.
12)	What time of day did you do the activity? When in the routine was the activity (what was before/after)?

RESULTS

The National Association for the Education of Young Children position statement guided the concept of community in an early childhood classroom throughout this project. Their statement includes the idea that community is developed by children being valued through active participation or observation within the classroom community, that children are given the opportunity to work together collaboratively, that children are able to make contributions to the group with a focus on their unique strengths, that every person in the classroom community, including the teacher, has a sense of responsibility and accountability to the group, and the importance of providing an environment that is safe and secure for all children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

The themes and patterns described from the storytelling dramatization activity in the observed class fall into and overlap with the guidelines developed by NAEYC. Four major themes emerged from the videotaped data of storytelling dramatizations. The themes align with community building in an early childhood classroom and included: 1) Atmosphere and Environment Provided by Teacher 2) Participation 3) Membership and Inclusion 4) Building Relationships through Stories. Narratives from the videotapes will support themes discussed. The lead teacher in the classroom was given the title; "Teacher M." and pseudonyms were used in place of children's names.

Atmosphere and Environment Provided by Teacher

Teacher's Role

Teacher M. played a major role in developing the storytelling dramatization activity and how the activity promoted a sense of community. Copple and Bredekamp state, "Practitioners create and foster a 'community of learners' that supports *all* children to develop and learn" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 16). Teacher M. described to me the process of her role in introducing and guiding the activity, "I start by telling a simple story and then the teachers model acting out the story for the children…The teacher's role is the facilitator. She helps kids with picking characters to make sure kids have a turn and to encourage when it's their time to play their part or character. So she is mostly the facilitator and the kids are in charge of it [the dramatization activity]," stated Teacher M. At the beginning of the year, many children had to be encouraged to act out their part through verbal cues from Teacher M. such as, "OK Whale, can you go out there and pretend you're swimming in the ocean?" Teacher M. discussed this as part of the her role, "Some kids have to be coached to go out on stage and do certain things…you'll give them verbal cues like, 'How would you be a shark?' Teacher M. valued children's ideas and contributions to the group by encouraging and guiding the children in acting their roles, as well as taking the time to use open-ended questions for children to interpret the role. Questions posed such as, "How can we act this out together?" also promoted collaboration, problem solving and pointed out the togetherness of this group activity.

Modeling group responsibility, being accountable for one's actions, and regulating behavior to show respect for the storyteller was an important part of the

Teacher M.'s role. Guiding comments that modeled this behavior included "Remember it is time to be a good audience and listen" and "Eric, it is time to listen to the story now".

Teacher M. modeled the importance of valuing children's ideas by allowing them to change parts of their story. When Teacher M. had time, she would change the storyline according to a child's new idea. For example, while reading aloud Lee's story about Transformers, Lee stated, "I need a blue, white, and orange transformer." Although his original story only included the generic character of 'Transformers,' Teacher M. allowed Lee to add the specific Transformer characters into his story. Often the storyteller would correct the teacher's pronunciation of a name or parts of the storyline. The children did remember the stories they told earlier in the day and the characters involved and wanted to make sure it was read properly. As Teacher M. read aloud Bryan's story about monsters, he corrected her pronunciation each time she read the character names of Rodon and Erogon. Taking the time to accommodate changes and include new ideas was one of many ways the teacher in this class provided a supportive environment for children and modeled valuing others ideas to the class group.

Children learned to value other's ideas, respect the storyteller and actors and understand appropriate behavior in a group activity by watching and observing others, including modeling by Teacher M. (Black, 1992; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; DeVries, et al., 2002; Epstein, 2009). Teacher M. modeled a sense of community by valuing the children's ideas and contributions to the group.

Place, Routine and Timing

Teacher M. chose to do the storytelling dramatization activity in the same area she held whole group, on a large oval rug in the center of the room. Having the activity in this spot helped children regulate their behavior and understand that the expectations of behavior were similar to sharing and turn taking at whole group time. This fostered respect for the author and actors participating in the dramatizations, leading to a safe and comfortable atmosphere in the classroom.

Following Vivian Paley's routine in the storytelling dramatization activity, the activity was done in the same steps each time: Read story aloud, storyteller chooses character for self, storyteller chooses other characters, and children act out story. The routine and familiarity of the activity gave the children the opportunity to feel secure in knowing what came next, helped them to take initiative in leading the activity, and provided the children the opportunity to be a responsible group member. Because of the familiarity, children knew when it was appropriate to share ideas and lead the activity. Although Teacher M. did have student teachers lead the activity at times, most of them followed this familiar routine. An exception to this was one day a student teacher did the activity out of order by not reading the story aloud first. This led to confusion among the children and a lack of engagement in the activity.

At times Teacher M. was rushed and did not acknowledge a child's ideas, or misinterpreted the children. During the middle of the year, Colin's story was being read aloud about Godzilla:

> Once upon a time there was a moving planet and the moving planet wasn't really a moving planet, it was a Space Godzilla…and Kingadora and Gygon and then he saw a Space Godzilla and he followed Space Godzilla and Gygon ran Space Godzilla on accident.

When Teacher M. finished reading, she began to list the characters that needed to be chosen and had the storyteller choose children. Just as the children were about to start acting out the story, Bryan in the audience raised his hand to contribute the idea that a character was missing on stage. The conversation between Bryan and Teacher M. went as follows:

> Bryan, "No, what about Space Godzilla?"
> Teacher M., "No Space Godzilla. We could have a Planet"
> Bryan, "There was a Space Godzilla, I heard it!"
> Teacher M., "Oh, I think it is all the same Godzilla."

Teacher M. did acknowledge Bryan's concerns briefly, but there was confusion among the children as to whether there was a Space Godzilla vs. a "regular" Godzilla. This is an example of how further discussion with the author, audience and teacher could provide opportunities to problem solve together as a group.

Throughout the year there were many times the children were able to lead, solve problems and take ownership of the activity when the teacher provided a consistent place and routine for the storytelling dramatization activity.

Taking Turns in a Community

Throughout storytelling dramatizations, Teacher M. guided the children in character selection with phrases such as, "Raise your hand quietly so Anna knows you want a turn", "She doesn't want to be a part, Anna", and "I think Lee already had a turn. Can you find another friend who hasn't had a turn yet?" If she noticed a child had not volunteered during the activity that day she asked, "Lynn you haven't had a turn yet, would you like to be Arielle?" By doing this she assisted the children in understanding

turn taking, as well as enabling the less visible children to be more visible to their classmates. The idea of taking turns was discussed often throughout the year, not only by the teachers, but also by the children, “But I haven’t had a turn yet,” “ He already had a turn,” or “I need to pick someone who hasn’t had a turn.”

Teacher M. often assisted children who had trouble reading social cues, to become visible to peers: *Teacher M.: “Michael hasn’t had a turn yet,” Teacher M.: “Erica, I see Michael has his hand raised, why don’t you give him a turn?”* Although he is raising his hand, Michael is a boy in the class that, at times, had difficulty taking turns, regulating his emotions, and delaying gratification, or in other words was vulnerable to rejection by peers in play. However, with Teacher M.’s assistance and his enthusiasm for acting out stories, his peers included Michael in their stories. Teacher M. assisted in building community and Michael’s socioemotional development by acknowledging his appropriate behavior at the moment to him and his peers. His eagerness to participate in every story and his exuberant actions, when given the chance to participate in acting, may result in acceptance and a positive response from peers.

Teachers throughout the year tried to guide children to raise their hands quietly. Teachers would state, “Remember, raise your hand quietly if you would like a turn in the story.” However, teachers could not follow through on this demand because the child storyteller was choosing who would be in story. Children were chosen more often when they made themselves visible and use verbal strategies. Children picked up on this and stated out loud, throughout the whole year, what character they wanted to be or say, “me, me, me.”

However, it is important to understand the developmental stage of the children in each classroom community, and that taking turns may mean something different to the children.

> Michael demonstrated his understanding of taking turns on a more basic level. Michael's and his friend, Caleb's, stories were acted out one after the other. Michael's story is first and Caleb participated as the Saber Tooth Tiger character. Next as Caleb tried to pick Michael to be in his story Teacher M. stated, "Michael, you've had a turn." Michael appeared upset to not be able have a turn in his friend's story. Although Teacher M. mentioned that he just had a turn in his own story, Michael expressed his disappointment and frustration by crying, "I didn't have a turn! I wanna be in him, I wanna be in your story". Michael was focused more on reciprocity: you were in my story, now I want to have a turn in your story. His concept of turn taking was very different than the teacher's perspective and some of his peers.

This example showed that everyone in the community was not in agreement or understanding of one of the rules or norms being placed on the community. Teacher M. did provide reasoning behind her suggestion, but Michael misinterpreted it. In order to establish an understanding of rules within a community, members should discuss, develop and practice, through actions, the rules together (DeVries & Zan, 1994; DeVries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, Sales, 2002; Epstein, 2009).

The storytelling dramatization activity could not have been a community building activity without the teacher first creating the safe and secure environment to promote community building and the cooperative nature of the activity. The strategies utilized by Teacher M., including modeling appropriate group behavior, being accountable and respectful of group members, valuing contributions and ideas of group members, encouraging turn taking and considering perspectives of others, provided an environment which allowed the next three themes to emerge over time, as the class acted out their stories together.

Participation

Every child in the class participated in the storytelling activity throughout the school year. Some children told and directed stories everyday, whereas others volunteered to act in the stories, but all gained the experience observing or actively participating in storytelling dramatizations. Children varied in how often they wrote stories or volunteered to participate, but all children knew and understood they could volunteer and be part of this activity. It is important to recognize that everyone in the group had an important role in the storytelling dramatizations and the roles of the storyteller, audience, and actor provide children with many opportunities to participate, observe others and contribute to the community. "By observing and participating in the community, children learn about themselves and their world and also how to develop positive, constructive relationships with other people….Children learn to respect and acknowledge differences of all kinds and to value each person" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p.16).

Storyteller

As storyteller and director, children in the classroom participated in a leadership role by telling their story and deciding who would act in their story. Not only was this pattern of leadership as the storyteller observed throughout the year in the videotapes, Teacher M. also reflected on leadership as an important skill gained through storytelling. She described leadership in this activity as a storyteller picking the children in the story, directing the children as characters in the story and guiding the teacher in how to read the story or pronounce character names. Because the activity was based on the children's

own stories, the children were more comfortable leading their peers in the activity and were provided with the opportunity to scaffold each other's leadership skills. These skills were obtained by observing strategies of other storytellers over time. Below are several examples that reinforce the notion that children practiced and modeled their leadership skills to the group.

> Caleb was a child with strong leadership skills, who actively engaged in the storytelling dramatizations, and had the unique ability to engage many children in his stories. Caleb participated at an intense level, trying to discuss roles, characters and who would do what before the teacher even had the chance to read the story aloud. "I wanna be the prehistoric bear!" he said, while stomping around while showing his teeth and claws. Taking the initiative to decide who would be in his story, modeling how they might act out the character, and at times, trying to rephrase the story, Caleb modeled leadership skills to his peers.

Participation of the storyteller and leadership skills in the storytelling dramatization activity evolved throughout the year. Another child, D. J., told a story at the beginning of the year, but chose only to have it read aloud, but not acted out. Teacher M. respected D. J.'s wishes, and he still gained the valuable experience of participating by sitting in front of the audience while his story was read aloud. Later in the year, D. J. became an active participant in the storytelling dramatizations as an actor and eventually also had his stories acted out by his classmates. Other storytellers also began by sitting in the author's chair quietly and only nodding or shaking their head at the teacher's prompts, but with each turn gained more confidence in leading their peers. By January, another reserved child, Lee, felt very comfortable in directing his peers in acting, "put on your helmet!" when the story stated to put on clothing.

Although children varied in their frequency of participation and leading the audience and actors as a storyteller, the dramatization lead to more and more children telling stories and directing stories as the year went on. Teacher M. described, "as the

year went on children began to wait all (45 minutes) of centers to tell a story, in order to have it acted out during the dramatization activity." Children frequently would state they wanted their story to be told, "Hey, I really, really, really want to do my story!" or "Is it my story's turn yet?" This provided evidence that children felt comfortable, secure and valued in their ideas as a storyteller and as leaders in the storytelling activity.

Audience Members

As the audience, children spent time watching and listening to their classmates' stories. Teacher M. explained the important role of the audience and often reminded children, "Remember, it is your turn to be the audience and listen to your friends' stories." The child audience observed and engaged in positive interactions with other audience members, teachers, author and actors by laughing, patting each other on the back, giving suggestions, or smiling at each other. These positive interactions and their impact will be discussed further in Building Relationships through Stories and Dramatization section that follows.

As with any activity in the classroom, there were times when some children were disengaged and most of these times occurred when children were part of the audience. But the amount of time and reasons for disengagement of the audience member varied. There were times that some children stared off into space, talked to the child next to them, or became restless and fidgety. In the storytelling dramatization activity most children were able to self-regulate and bring their attention back to the activity, usually due to their interest in watching their peers act or story content. Storytelling dramatization provides opportunities for children to practice self-regulation skills and be

a responsible member of a group by participating as an audience member. Observing the audience closely there were times when some children were distracted and the teacher had to guide the children's attention back to the activity and assisted in developing self-regulation skills. The following is an example of not only Teacher M. helping children to be accountable to the group, but also other classmates being responsible by helping with reminders as well.

> During the role selection process, there are two girls in the circle with a boy in-between who begin to converse. The boy attempts to interact with the girl on the one side of him by leaning in front of her face and talking to her. She responds by leaning forward and back in an attempt to continue to watch the activity and avoid the boy. Teacher M. reminds the boy it is time to watch and listen to the story. He now focuses on the storyteller selecting characters, but the girl who was once paying attention is now talking to the girl next to her. The boy leans over and reminds the girl, "You have to listen to the story!" She responds with, "NO!" She then leans forward, falling off mat, but the boy begins to try to regulate her behavior, "Get back on your mat." and trying to get Teacher M.'s attention. The teachers begin to clap at the end of the story and the boy quickly turns around to face the stage.

Conversations such as this one occurred often among the audience members, with children of more advanced social interaction and self-regulation skills reminding and directing other children in the audience, providing evidence of community building opportunities within the audience in which the children began to hold each other accountable to the group's well-being and showed respect for the storyteller and actors.

Although it is important to note that when audience members talked and appeared to be daydreaming, it did not necessarily mean they were disengaged. A pattern emerged showing that many times the children talked among themselves, but they were actually discussing ideas and characters from the story. Providing a context for children to talk to their peers about the activity and to collaborate in order to build on each other's ideas is a community building strategy (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The following examples

provide evidence of moments when audience members first appeared to be disengaged or uninterested in the activity. Upon closer observation, the children actions were developmentally appropriate in the ebb and flow of engagement, attention, and discussion.

> While Becca's story about princesses and monsters was read aloud and she was selecting characters, Aaron and Amy discussed some of the characters while sitting in the audience. Aaron stated several times, "I wanna be the monster" and Amy responded, "No monsters are in it." Aaron repeats, "I wanna be the monster" and again Amy said, "No monsters are in it, no monsters." Aaron responded, "Just one monster" with his pointer finger up, showing the number one. Amy went on to discuss, "….it was Jasmine."

Although on first observation it appeared that Aaron and Amy were not paying attention to the activity and talking on the side, they were actually engaged in a discussion about the story, characters and their ideas about the story.

> Another example of children appearing disengaged, tired or distracted was during Eric's story. Several boys were lying on their stomachs, head in hands, or rocking side to side on their stomach. They at first appeared to be disengaged when the story was being read aloud, but once the teacher requested that Eric choose five Saber Tooth Tigers, all four boys quickly and enthusiastically raised their hands in the air. At first glance none of these boys seemed interested in the activity, story or characters, but in fact immediately volunteered to participate.

As audience members, the children were still engaged and showing interest in a developmentally appropriate manner. The opportunity to observe and discuss the stories, as audience members, allowed children to interact at their own pace and in a meaningful way with other members of the classroom community.

After observing the videotapes and reviewing observational notes, I noticed that there were two boys who never participated as storytellers or actors over the 6 month videotaping time period.

> One of the boys, Ansel, who did not participate as a storyteller or actor, was an engaged and interested audience member. He watched the activity intently and

> continually followed storytellers and actors as they moved around the stage or select characters. His gaze also shifted to the teacher whenever she would speak. At one point he also interacted with the girl sitting next to him, Ali, as she sat back down from acting. He smiled and talked to her for a few minutes. He then went back to watching children act, smiled and appeared to enjoy watching his peers. Ansel showed little fidgeting throughout the ten-minute dramatization session and only at the end of the last story, did he lay down. Ansel showed interest in the activity throughout and had the opportunity to interact and learn from his peers within the classroom community.

The Teacher remarked that, Ansel, who was also the youngest child in the class, did participate in the storytelling dramatization as an actor and storyteller the following school year. This specific case demonstrated that storytelling dramatization activity is a process, where some children may take longer to develop an interest in acting and telling stories, but Teacher M. and other members of the community respected their unique developmental stages and desire to observe. Despite his participation only as an audience member, he still learned through observation about the community around him.

Reflection with Teacher M. confirmed that the two boys did not participate as actors or storytellers, but she also commented on the importance of the audience members and their role, “The audience is just as important as the kids participating (as actors and storyteller). They are still a part of it [the activity], even though they are not acting because even kids that do not act out will still show appreciation at the end and say, ‘oh good job’.” As audience members the children showed in this activity that they were collaborating on ideas, learned to be accountable to the community group, and valued other’s ideas by being responsive and appreciative members of the audience.

Actor

As actors, children build community through having a sense of ownership in the stories, being active participants, and working collaboratively in a group. Children showed their active engagement in the activity by volunteering for roles with enthusiasm and excitement in their voices, “I wanna be the ghost!”. At times they also pointed each other out; for example, one child says to Teacher M., “Erica does (wants a turn).” They remembered which characters were in the story and even parts of the storyline. Some began to act out their character from the moment they were chosen, and continued until sitting back down at the end. Often they acted out the character with their own ideas, “I was a transformer that could transform into an airplane!” explained one boy as he finished acting and sat back down to join the audience.

Every time children participated as actors, they were, like the audience members, given the chance to practice regulating their behavior and maintaining a sense of responsibility, especially when acting in stories that contained violence or fighting. Self-regulation skills required to “just pretend” at very exciting moments in a story, lead children to be accountable and have a sense of responsibility to other members of the group. Almost always children were able to restrain from actually hitting or kicking their classmates. In one story about Ninja Turtles there were 11 children on stage engaged in pretend fighting, both boys and girls, waving arms, circling each other, stomping feet, and running in place. Children showed great self-restraint by limiting physical contact and being gentle with classmates. This story allowed children to practice behavior that was appropriate and conducive to the well-being of all of the children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

In addition to practicing self-regulation skills, acting in the stories gave children the opportunity to experience pretend play themes or roles of the opposite gender, valuing each other's differences, as well as construct an understanding of the world around them by trying new roles or characters. NAEYC emphasizes the opportunity for children to actively play and problem-solve together to enhance children's learning and evolve ideas about concepts such as gender roles. This collaborative experience of discovering and experimenting with social norms and roles furthers children awareness of the world around them and community expectations (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Epstein, 2009; Dyson, 1994; Nicolopoulou, 1997). The character's gender and who could act out various roles was frequently discussed during the activity.

> Anna told a story that included her sister as a character. Anna stated, "My sister is a girl", as she looks around to pick a child for the character of her sister. Teacher M. stated, "Sometimes boys can play girl roles." Anna responded, "But my sister is a girl." Anna tried to pick Carrie, but Carrie states, "I don't want to be the sister." Teacher M. goes on to tell Anna, "She doesn't want to. Can you pick a friend who has their hand up? Those are the friends that want to be a part of it. A boy can pretend to be a sister too." Anna approached Michael and tapped him on the head to be the sister. The next character to select is her Mother. Anna picks another boy, D.J. As D.J. joins Michael on stage, Michael stated, "I'm a girl too" while giggling.

This example of conversation between Teacher M. and child, as well as peers, not only provided Anna with a new concept about who could pretend to be which characters, but all of the children were able to hear and learn from this conversation. The topic of character gender and actors was discussed throughout the year and as the year progressed children participated as characters of the opposite gender.

> In November there was a character in Becca's story that started out as a monster and changed into a wicked queen later in the story. The boy acting the role of the Monster, Aaron, became very upset with the change in the character. He stated, "I can't! No, no I'm not the wicked queen. Nooo!" and continued to be a monster. By March children frequently volunteered and acted in roles of the

> opposite gender, without discussion or giggles. In Lee's story on March 26, Amy volunteered to be an Army Guy and was selected by Lee. That same day Colin told a story about a Weather Fairy, Ice Queen and Fire King. He chose to be the Weather Fairy and acted it out by running on his tiptoes and flapping his wings.

Children were able to learn new perspectives of members of the community and the world around them by experimenting in roles of the opposite gender. The children's increasing comfort level with participating in these roles provided the opportunity to become accepting and understand others' differences.

The children who volunteered as actors were learning important skills that helped to promote a sense of community within the storytelling group. These skills included accountability, responsibility, collaboration, developing a sense of self-worth within the group, and problem solving. Acting in a story also provided children with the opportunity to collaborate and problem solve with classmates whom they did not typically interact with in order to express story and ideas through physical motions. Acting as a character in stories allowed children to experiment in new roles and adjust concepts of group norms and values through social interaction and play as a group.

Each individual in the class played an important part in the storytelling dramatization, either through active participation or observation as a storyteller, audience member or actor. The storytelling dramatization allows for an age appropriate, child-centered activity that caters to young children's egocentrism ("my story," "pick me, me, me"), but creates group awareness through the three roles of storytelling, actor and audience. The activity would be incomplete without a storyteller, author, or audience in which to learn to respect other's ideas and community responsibilities. The various roles of telling a story, directing, acting and observing allowed children of all abilities to

contribute in his/her own way, and because it was an activity based on the children's own stories, children valued the collaborative experiences. Children became valued members of the community and developed a sense of belonging by participating in one of these roles.

Membership and Inclusion

Membership

Learning from each other's unique ideas and strengths allows for a greater respect and valuing of each person in the classroom, leading to an atmosphere of a community (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Children contributed unique ideas through acting, directing, responding as an audience member and writing story themes. The children also learned to be accountable to one another and responsible for their actions during an activity they were "in charge of." Valuing other's ideas, contributing stories, feeling that one's own ideas are valued among their peers and becoming accountable to each other develops a sense of belonging and the feeling that the children are members of the group. There were numerous examples that emerged from the videotapes, providing evidence of children valuing each other's ideas, being accountable to each other, and having a sense of responsibility to the group.

In addition to the examples discussed previously in the participant roles, another way children expressed that they valued other's ideas was by including peer strategies and ideas into their own repertoire. Children observed and learned to experiment with other's strategies in being selected as a character, choosing characters, or acting out the stories. Including other children's strategies into their own repertoire provided evidence

that the children in the classroom valued peers ideas, and often built on those ideas or changed them slightly to reach their goal. Children with more advanced social skills modeled strategies to be selected such as following teacher suggestions to raise their hands, getting up on their knees to be more visible, and verbalizing with, 'me, me, me!' or 'I wanna be (character name).'

Children also learned to become valued members of the group by sharing ideas in times of problem solving and negotiation of roles. Often there was a conversation between the author and audience members about who would play what role.

> Sam wrote a story about people and spiders. He selected his classmate Michael to be a 'people'. However, Michael really wanted to be a spider in Sam's story and so he says to Sam, "I want to be a spider, I am a spider." He then goes over to Teacher M. and repeated the request. Michael was persistent and approached Sam again and suggested that there be two spiders in his story. His persistence paid off because Sam then approached Teacher M. to agree, "There can be 2 spiders."

The fact that Sam acknowledged and accepted Michael's idea provides evidence that he values his classmate's ideas. Teacher M. also recognized Michael's ability to contribute valuable ideas to the group, "Michael was a deep thinker and problem-solver," as in another example where Michael stated, "There can be two meglodans!"

Individual children in the classroom provided their ideas throughout the activity that children later used and built upon. The activity provided each child with the opportunity to utilize their strengths, feel competent in their abilities and then, in turn, feel a valued member of the group. The following are examples from the videos where children's individual strengths are copied and appreciated by classmates.

> Caleb showed great enthusiasm and exaggeration in acting out his stories. Caleb stories often contained monsters, velociraptors, and other kinds of dinosaurs. Each time Caleb would stand up to have his story read aloud he would step into character. Entering the stage area, Caleb would hunch over, whip his head back,

> hold up his "claws," snarl his teeth, and stomp over to the teacher. From the start Caleb modeled new and unique ideas to his classmate through his imaginative acting and ability to verbalize directions in acting, which other children were later seen utilizing in the activity.
>
> Anna was a child who Teacher M. described as being very shy and reserved during whole group activities, but she became more comfortable with time. In the first video observed on October 3rd, Anna is the first child to tell a story and have it acted out. As she selected classmates from the audience, she slowly walked around the edge of the circle with her finger on her chin, contemplating whom to pick. She was thoughtful and deliberate in whom she was picking and almost seemed to be savoring the power of the storyteller position. Her method of selecting classmates can be seen later being utilized by other children: circling and thinking, prolonging the privilege of picking and leading the group.

Children in the classroom became members of a group by observing, experimenting, and utilizing strategies of other peers. The children learned the ideas and strategies of their peers could have positive outcomes. Experiencing this process as a classroom group formed a sense of membership when utilizing and sharing in strategies and outcomes.

Inclusion

Although the class consisted of a fairly homogenous group of children in terms of race and ethnicity, the class was a mixed age group with great developmental diversity. Children of differing abilities and on various levels of the developmental spectrum participated in the storytelling dramatization activity. Because this activity was child-centered and followed children's interests, it was effective with children at various individual ability levels. Participation allowed peers to view children with developmental delays in a positive light and focused on individual strengths. Below are four specific examples of children who participated and were included in the dramatization activity at their own ability level.

> David was a 4 year-old boy who told stories by listing objects and characters, often a characteristic of younger children's stories. Classmates volunteered to act in his stories even though David told very simple stories. His classmates showed that they valued his ideas and as the year went on, David's stories became more complex after hearing and observing other classmates' stories. As the year went on David increased his leadership skills by directing the other children in his story. By March he selected children and guided them to the stage by leading them with his hand on their backs or pointing to the position he would like for them to be on stage. Other children also showed they valued David's contributions by selecting him to participate in their stories, Lee stated, "Hum, I'll pick David". At another time, Bryan selected David to be in his story to be the Devil character. As David was getting up to join the other actors, he tripped on the carpet. Bryan, asked, "Are you OK?" and David nodded his head, yes. These examples provide evidence that his classmates valued his contributions to the group and they showed compassion and empathy toward David, despite his being at a different developmental level cognitively, social, and verbally than the other children.

Success in social interaction, relationships and leadership occurred in the storytelling activity for other children that may have trouble at other times in the classroom experience.

> Teacher M. described Michael as very intense, as having difficulty following rules and liking things a certain way. There were times in the storytelling dramatization activity and in the classroom when Michael had difficulty regulating his emotions and he became very angry. However, there were also many moments when Michael was successful in the storytelling dramatization activity. According to Teacher M. stories were acted out in the order told, with Michael's story usually first. This provides evidence of his enthusiasm for the activity. Michael was frequently chosen by his classmates to be in their stories and classmates enthusiastically volunteered to be in his stories as well. Michael would often add a sense of humor to his acting, which his classmates valued through joining in laughter or smiling at his actions. This positive reaction to Michael's stories, acting and volunteering placed him in a new light with his peers and provided him with a positive experience in the classroom community.

Michael was not the only child with developmental delays to be seen in a positive light by his peers in the classroom. Adam also developed new leadership skills, social interaction skills, and ability to express his interest in the activity over time.

> Although Adam was not as advanced in social and language skills as some of his peers, he was also able to participate successfully in the activity over time.

> Throughout the storytelling dramatization activity, Adam was often quiet and not verbal with his peers. Socially, he did not often engage with his peers in the circle and takes longer than his peers to imitate strategies in being selected to act. To show that he wanted to participate in the acting, he would often stand up, or repeat part of the story aloud. On the first day of storytelling dramatizations, Adam stood up in the center of the stage. Teacher M. asked if he would like to be the frog and he nodded yes. He then went to join his peers in stage. By March, Adam begins to verbally express his interest in acting. After a story about Scooby Doo was read aloud, Adam began to sing the Scooby Doo theme song aloud, expressing his interest in the story. Over time he learned to request to be a character, like many of the other children, "I wanna be Scooby Doo."

Children in the class were at their own developmental levels, and all were able to successfully participate in the dramatization activity. Teacher M. reflected on the fact that over time, children began to select children to be in their stories that they may not have otherwise chosen to play with in the regular routine of the classroom.

As mentioned in the participation section, children engage in roles of the opposite gender, but it is also important to note the pattern of inclusiveness in terms of gender. Teacher M.'s classroom had more boys than girls, but they had the same amount of participation and leadership as storytellers and actors and boys. Although all girls in the class were engaged in the activity, it may surprise early childhood professionals and teachers to hear of boys' intense interest in this group activity. Eleven of the 13 boys in the class told stories or acted in a classmate's story throughout the year. This activity provided boys with an appropriate place and time to experience pretend play themes such as fighting and killing that some teachers may shy away from in the classroom due to a fear of escalating inappropriate aggressive behavior. Boys maybe excluded or requested to change their play in the classroom, whereas stories that included aggression or violence allowed boys to be included and accepted by their peers and teachers. One of the few teacher rules of

this activity was keeping hands to self and just pretending to fight, which provided children an opportunity to act through imaginative play themes such as characters fighting, smashing, kicking, and dying in a safe context of storytelling dramas.

Storytelling dramatization provided children with the opportunity to learn about their individual abilities, learn about peers in the classroom, appreciate differences and unique ideas of others, and broaden their awareness of belonging to the group of children.

Building Relationships through Stories and Dramatization

Children share in meaningful experiences and show appreciation for each other's stories through the emotional elements of storytelling (Child Care Connection, 1999; Paley, 1990). As children participated in the storytelling dramatization activity there was an unnoticed communication between children, which at first glance was easily overlooked by teachers and adults. But taking closer observations of this activity, I noticed the little actions and moments that connect the children to each other and their stories. Although the teachers aimed to connect the audience to the plays by clapping at the end of each story, children had their own way of showing they appreciate and enjoyed watching their classmates. This included moments observed of emotional displays of laughter, sighs, gasps, or excited discussion with their neighbor. At times adults perceived this laughter, talk, or "noise" as interruption or disrespect for their peers performing. However, upon closer look, the children were bonding over this experience, and creating a community through humor, fright, shock, or sadness. In the first video Kelly told a story about her mother being "smashed" by a car. When the story was first

read aloud, children had no reaction to this portion of the story. However, once children were acting the story out, several children reacted to the idea of the mother being smashed by a car with gasps, moans, and "oh no!" The mother character was one that most of the children could relate to and it was obvious by the emotional reaction of the audience members.

Over time children enhanced the humorous aspect of their storytelling. This routine allowed children to gain a sense of belonging or membership between their peers and was a part of the children's culture that adults do not always understand (Erwin & Guintini, 2000). At times when the children were laughing and giggling teachers would shush or remind children to be quiet. This provided evidence that the teachers did not always recognize the importance of shared joy and laughter, and that storytelling dramas provided an opportunity for children to form their own sense of shared experience. The following story was one of the first of many stories written about "talking and walking heads". The child created a silly topic that the children routinely included in their stories after this example, and they continued to find it amusing.

> Colin told the first story containing characters such as walking or talking heads and eyeballs. The student teacher assisted children in preparing them for the funny story, "Guys, this is such a funny story! You are going to want to listen very carefully, ok? Ready?" Immediately children began to giggle and laugh at the story told by Colin, with Colin beaming in the background. After the story was read aloud, it was time to select the characters, such as "walking head" and "eyeball". Children immediately and excitedly raise their hands, up on their knees waving arms and saying, "me, me, me" (a strategy often used by children to be selected over the entire year, even though the student teacher attempted to get them to quietly raise their hands without success). Nine children volunteer enthusiastically to be the Walking Head, and Eric is chosen. Once chosen, many of the children were already in character and practicing their movements. The children acted out the humorous story in quite an amusing fashion by making faces, crawling in funny ways, and bouncing here and there like a walking head or eyeball. The audience giggled and laughed, looking at the actors and

> glancing at each other as they shared in this moment of pure child-initiated enjoyment, creating a sense of community.

Children displayed appreciation through simple actions such as a touch or pat on the back, a smile or laugh, which provided evidence of their emotional connection to each other and the story, and provides evidence of building relationships in the classroom community.

Stories were sometimes written with friends and classmates as characters in a story. Storytelling and dramatization provided the children with opportunities to express to one another their feelings and relationships with each other.

> In one of his first stories of many about firefighters, Lee included several of his classmates in the story. Teacher M. read, "Lee and Anna and Rachel and Sam were in the road and the fire truck smashed them." In the audience Rachel smiled at Ali next to her, who giggled, both pleased that Rachel was included in Lee's story. Rachel then goes on to volunteer to be herself by waving her hand in the air and bouncing up and down.

Other times the storyteller would motion or whisper to a classmate in the audience about being in his/her story, showing that they already had an idea of who they wanted to be in their story.

> Sam wrote a story about Transformers. Before the story is read aloud he states, "I wanna be Optimus Prime. Colin is in mine!" Sam, Colin and Eric continued to have a conversation about who will play what. As Teacher M. read about bad guys, Eric stated, "I wanna be the bad guy." Sam nodded his head in agreement with Eric and whispered, "Ok, in a minute," pointing to Eric.

Both of these examples provide evidence that the children give forethought to who will be in their stories and reflects the relationships they have built with peers in the classroom.

Building consistent, positive and caring relationships is a foundation for developing a classroom community (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Through the storytelling

dramatization activity children shared in meaningful experiences, humor, and working together to accomplish a task (Paley, 1990). Children also learned about emotions, expressing emotions, empathy and ideas to others, and taking on the perspective of their peers through telling and acting out their stories. The children in this classroom built relationships with others through these shared experiences and learning opportunities in this whole group activity.

DISCUSSION

Storytelling Dramatizations and Community

Storytelling and drama have been used in early childhood classrooms for many years and in various forms in order to enhance early literacy skills, communication, emotional regulation, symbolic representation, and social interaction through working in groups (Curenton, 2006; Dyson, 2004, Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Libby & Aries, 1989; Nicolopoulou & Richner, 2007; McGrath, Taylor, & Kamen, 2004; Tallant, 1992; Paley, 1990; Rothman, 2006; Wang & Leichtman, 2000). Vivian Paley specifically focused on allowing children to tell and act out their own stories in her kindergarten classroom (Child Care Connection, 1999; Paley, 1990). The storytelling dramatization activity, done for an age appropriate length of time and as an option to children in the classroom, provides a unique time in the classroom where children come together as a group to build relationships, participate and collaborate as a group, and value each individual's strengths to develop a sense of belonging to a community (Paley, 1990). Storytelling dramatization incorporates the pretend play that children thrive on, but yet includes the ideas, participation, and cooperation of the class as a whole group, which are important components to community building (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009; DeVries, et al, 2002; Epstein, 2009).

Implications for Practice

Through the in-depth nature of this study, I gained insights about the teacher's role in the storytelling dramatizations though both systematic observation of the videos and discussions with Teacher M. Although not every strategy used by Teacher M. will work in other classrooms because of the uniqueness of each early childhood classroom, there are important examples that can be utilized from this classroom's experience with storytelling.

Guidance from the teacher, especially when first introducing the activity, was crucial. Teacher M. provided important strategies for the children to use, such as raising hands to let others know they want to be in a story, giving suggestions on how to act out story and pointing out children who were less skilled at making their presence known. Similarly, the NAEYC position statement on developmentally appropriate practice acknowledges the importance of the teacher's role in developing a caring community by providing professionals with specific duties. Some of these duties, or goals for best practice, align with strategies observed in this classroom, such as assisting children to develop responsibility, providing a safe environment physically and psychologically, ensuring children find enjoyment in learning, and valuing children's contributions (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Although children should feel that the teacher values their ideas and suggestions, it is just as important for them to be valued by their peers in order to build a sense of safety, belonging and membership within the whole group. Storytelling dramatization provided children with the opportunity to hear, see, and talk about each other's experiences and ideas, while becoming familiar with peers in the classroom. The activity

also provided children with various levels of social skills the opportunity to participate in an activity that engaged them with the whole classroom group and to observe appropriate interactions between peers. The dramatization activity, guided by Teacher M., gave positive reinforcement to young children that were susceptible to rejection or exclusion by peers due to a lack of social interaction skills, lack ability to regulate behaviors or emotions, and lack ability to enter group play (Gomes & Livesey, 2008). Children such as Michael, Adam and David were provided the opportunity to be seen positively by their peers and feel that the class group valued their contributions, while at the same time practicing turn-taking and regulating their behavior among peers. This activity provides positive reinforcement and joint positive play experiences within the whole group, as well as opportunities to observe peers with more advanced social interaction skills, which could possibly impact social status and organization among the group (Hartup, Glazer, & Charlesworth, 1967; Roopnarine & Adams, 1985;Vaughn & Waters, 1981). Children who were storytellers were also given the opportunity to be valued as leaders, regardless of their social interaction skills or status within the group. Time spent near a teacher in the classroom, as when the author of a story is next to teacher during dramatization, can promote visibility by peers, positive experiences for these children, and possibly peer acceptance (Hartup, et al., 1967; Vaughn & Waters, 1981). Research shows that as children become more familiar with one another, they feel more secure and are accepted by their peers, leading to more cooperation within the group (Epstein, 2009). As children collaborated and contributed to the classroom group during storytelling dramatization, it helped children to feel validated, competent and important as individuals within the group and have a sense of belonging (Black, 1992; Epstein, 2009; Paley,

1990). This activity allowed children in the class to be valued by both their teachers and peers through telling stories, acting out motions, and having positive and constructive interactions with their peers (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Storytelling dramatization allowed children to become familiar with others in the class and interact with children they would not normally initiate play with in the classroom. Over the time of the six-month period, as children became more comfortable with each other, the routine of the activity created a safe activity and place to share ideas.

As children reach the age of 4 and 5 years, they begin to segregate their playgroups by gender (Barbu, 2003; Hartup, 1983; Johnson, et al, 1997). When building community in an early childhood classroom it is a challenge for the teacher to bring both boys and girls together in an activity of interest and engagement for both genders. When developing activities and fostering community in the classroom, not only is it best practice to meet individual child developmental needs, but teachers must also remember the importance of meeting the unique needs of boys, including the need for 'active and whole body play' (Bredekamp, 2011). As demonstrated in these results, there was active and frequent participation by boys in this activity, as well as children becoming comfortable, over time, with acting in roles traditionally labeled for the opposite gender. This activity also provides opportunities to foster boys' awareness and attention to social cues and responsiveness, for both genders to observe each other's play strategies, and for both genders to experience each other's play topics (Black, 1992). The interest to both boys and girls in the storytelling dramatization activity allowed for both genders to experiment with new roles and play themes in a safe context, in which they might not experience in free play situations, such as the dramatic play center.

Lastly, it is important for teachers to recognize that the timing of the activity can impact community building in regards to being able to contribute new ideas, problem solve, and negotiate roles. These skills are necessary for working cooperatively in a group and the teacher must give appropriate amounts of time for each child's story. The teacher should not guide the activity so slowly that one child's story dominates the activity, but provide enough time for each story to be led by the children with sufficient attention to the children's pace and necessary "wait time" in decision-making.

The role of the teacher in storytelling dramatization is to be a facilitator and lay the foundation for the children to be able to participate, feel they are in a safe environment to contribute ideas, becomes included members of the group, and build relationships.

Teacher Goals vs. Child Interest

Teachers will be concerned with implementing this activity in the classroom, while at the same time meeting educational standards. The storytelling dramatization activity nicely meets the criteria of intentional teaching practices (meeting child development goals) while also being a meaningful, child-led activity. Within this activity there were many times Teacher M. assisted the children with engaging in appropriate behavior, self-regulation, and learning to respect others, as provided in previous examples. It is also important to note, at times, because of a focus on teacher goals there were times when the teachers missed children's cues, ideas, and moments when children were gaining these developmental objectives in their own time and in their own ways. Teachers must remember to utilize best teaching practices in whole group activities in

order promote learning and developmental goals through attention to children's cues, scaffolding, and co-construction of the children's knowledge (Bredekamp, 2011). After discussing the storytelling activity with an assistant teacher, I recognized that even though this activity is considered a child led activity, many teachers still have teacher-focused goals. One teacher stated, "Oh you should have been here yesterday. The children were soooo good! They all sat and listened and were quiet, and didn't even do the "me, me, me" thing!" This statement provides evidence that, although the activity should be filled with problem solving, negotiation of roles and discussion, the teacher values following directions and self-regulation skills over some of the growth that could happen when we release some of the leadership to the children. This example shows the impact the teacher's goals or expectations for the children can have on the activity. Further research should focus on the dynamic between teacher guidance and children as leaders in the activity because of the concept of taking turns and equality in opportunities to participate was a continual focus by children and Teachers during the activity. Vivian Paley placed a strong emphasis on taking turns, equality, and avoiding favoritism in the dramatization activity (Child Care Connection, 1999; Cooper 2009; Paley 1990). Teachers who embrace this thought often have storytellers choose actors from a class list to ensure everyone has a turn, with the idea that this method allows children to still have a sense of choice, while interacting with various peers (Child Care Connection, 1999; Cooper, 2009; Paley, 1990). Other teachers believe it is the storyteller's choice in who is selected to be in their story, regardless of favoritism. Given the struggle between children and teacher's ideas of turn-taking and equality, the community as a whole should decide on what this concept means, and the children should have a understanding of

concepts that will guide the activity. Further research should be paid to children's ideas of equity and adults' ideas, as well as the impact of this on the community during storytelling dramatization.

Teachers may miss the fact that children are building some of the necessary skills to build a classroom community because of a teacher focus on individual child skills, such as emergent literacy, self regulation and mathematics. Although all of these individual skills are important for young children to develop, it is also important to recognize moments of children working together and drawing the children's attention to this togetherness (Epstein, 2009). Not only do children learn from the teacher during time spent in whole group activities, such as with storytelling dramatization, but these activities should also be a time to share, collaborate, build relationships, and learn from other peers (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006; Vygotsky, 1933; Vygotsky, 1978). Many of the skills required of children to develop a sense of community cannot be learned by themselves, but instead need to be fostered through child-led, peer group interactions and pretend play (Black, 1992; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; DeVries, et al., 2002; Epstein, 2009; Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Learning to listen to others, negotiating and problem solving, self-regulating emotions and actions, leading others, and contributing ideas are skills necessary to group dynamics and interacting with others throughout life (Battistich, Solomon, & Watson, 1998; Epstein, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 1997). It is important to remember, as teachers in the classroom, that these individual skills are being developed through the interaction and relationship building that is occurring in the dramatization activity. Recognizing when children are developing these skills through peer interactions will assist teachers in letting children lead the activity and act only as a

guide when needed. Storytelling provided the children observed in this study a chance to develop and foster many of these individual skills and feel competent in the skills, which over time then enabled creating a sense of belonging to the larger class group.

Sociocultural Context

Teachers in the past decade have been faced with the challenge of meeting individual learning needs of diverse groups of children in developmentally appropriate ways (Dyson & Genishi, 2009). Nonetheless, curriculum and assessment in many preschools and kindergartens have become a one-size fits all, teacher-directed format, which does not always meet individual learning styles or developmental needs (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Devries, et al. 2002; Hyson, 2008). Teachers within public schools also face increased challenge to provide evidence of learning and performance through standardized testing. The storytelling and dramatization activity embraces individual strengths and allows children to participate in their own ways, but yet builds cognitive, social, language and physical development, and meets many learning, performance and content standards required in many early childhood public school classrooms (Bredekamp, 2011). This activity also embraces effective teaching practices such as modeling, questioning to promote thinking and problem solving, co-constructing knowledge with peers and teachers, and offering assistance and scaffolding learning (Bredekamp, 2011). By utilizing teaching strategies such as these, children learn specific content skills such as early reading and writing skills. Teachers could assess these skills through observation, anecdotal notes, and photographs of the dramatization activity. Storytelling also provides opportunities for authentic assessment of many creative skills

such as range in detail, vocabulary, emotions, and imagination (Hennessey & Amabile, 1988). Early childhood educators can therefore use this activity to provide evidence of children's learning, growth, and construction of knowledge through a child-led, play-based activity (DeVries, et al., 2002; Dyson & Genishi, 2009). Teachers are able to foster and document learning in a developmentally appropriate way through peer interaction and scaffolding, while building relationships and community, when storytelling and dramatization are incorporated into the classroom (Curenton, 2006; Darling & Groth, 2001; Devries, et al., 2002; Rothman, 2006).

Strengths and Limitations of Study

As with every research study there are some limitations to this project. First, this study involved videotapes of children, rather than direct observation in real time. Although this provided consistency over time in observing and interpretations without participatory bias, this study did not contain the deep understanding of the classroom community a qualitative researcher that is in the field would understand from observing in the classroom (Charmez, 2006; Geertz, 1973; Graue & Walsh, 1998). Further research involving observing children over-time in various classroom activities, including storytelling and dramatizations, would provide information about the impact storytelling dramatization and community building may have on the group interactions of children throughout the day.

This study describes the experience of children in this specific classroom environment. Different teachers, children and contexts may elicit different peer interactions from young children (Engel, 2005; Gaure & Walsh, 1998). Because of this it

may not possible to generalize these results to all populations of young children. Continued research over time and various settings would enhance the findings of the present study.

As discussed in the Theoretical Background section, there are strengths to utilizing interpretive methods when researching classrooms and young children. Along with the need for studying children in context of natural environments, the process question of, "how does the process of storytelling dramatization influence group social interaction and community dynamics?" and the descriptive nature of the study can be quite useful to teachers and practical use in the classroom. Early childhood professionals are aware of the complexity of the dynamics of each group of children that enter their classroom each year, leading them to be interested in how and why outcomes of an in-depth and meaning-making interpretive study. Interpretive science provides teachers and practitioners with descriptive examples that can be related and applied to their own experiences in the classroom.

Conclusion

From this study early childhood professionals, especially teachers, can learn the importance of adding storytelling dramatization to their daily or weekly curriculum. Through this activity children not only gain essential cognitive, language and literacy skills, but also social and emotional skills that lead to children building relationships, membership and belonging as a community. This occurs because the activity is meaningful to the children themselves and focused on children's ideas, stories and experiences. The children are leaders and work together as a cooperative team who share

in the enjoyment of storytelling, acting and observing. Storytelling dramatization in this early childhood classroom gave Teacher M. a child-led, whole group activity that implemented the many components of “creating a caring community of learners” from, a tool many early childhood professionals are familiar with, the NAEYC position statement of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

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